

**Ripples Part 21:  
The Guidance of the Spirit  
Acts 16.6-10**

**June 29, 2025**

**David Henderson**

If you've been a follower of Christ long enough, or if you have hung around with followers long enough, eventually you might hear someone say something like, "God told me this." Or "God led me in this way."

Then they often follow it up with something like, "Now, I didn't hear an audible voice, but I had a clear sense that this is what God was saying to me."

What do we make of that? Is that legitimate? Does God speak to us? Does he show us the way he wants us to go, or tell us what to say, or what to do, or not to say, or not to do?

And if He does . . . think of what a comfort and encouragement it would be to experience God in that kind of intimate and involved sort of way. And think of what a benefit it would be, to have an inner GPS to guide us as we come to decision points along the way each day

The passage we're looking at today is a great case study for us to explore when it comes to this whole question of hearing God's voice and receiving direction from God.

Right now we're in a series on the Book of Acts. Acts is a history of the early church that is included among the books and letters that make up the New Testament.

We're looking this morning at Acts chapter 16, where we find Paul, a recently converted follower of Jesus and one of the leaders in the early church, and some of his companions, on a journey. Picking up the story in Acts chapter 16:

**Acts 16.6**

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia .

. . .  
You'll be able to find Phrygia and Galatia right in the middle of this map of what we know today as Turkey.



For a bit of context, this is technically Paul's third missionary journey. The first one we don't have a lot of information about. It took place not long after Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, and it took him to Syria, in the lower right corner of this map, and to Tarsus, his hometown, on the Mediterranean, and to Cilicia, the region surrounding it.

His second journey left from Antioch, which had become Paul's new ministry base, over on the right side of the map. Paul and his companion Barnabas sailed from there to the island of Cyprus and then went up the land we now know as Turkey. They hiked up to a city called Pisidian Antioch, right about where the G in Galatia is, and then turned east, to the right, traveling to Iconium and Lystra and Derbe before circling back and then down to the Mediterranean and heading for home.

Now on this third journey, the account of which begins in Acts 15.36, Paul, this time with Silas and a few others, sets out again from his home base in Antioch. First they loop through Syria and Cilicia, revisiting the churches that Paul had established during his initial mission work..

Then they hop on the Via Sebaste, which was the primary Roman road in this part of the world, and they begin to travel west.



Here's a picture of the Via Sebaste in the region of Cilicia north of Tarsus, a portion of the road where we know Paul and Silas would have walked. A number of years ago I got to walk for a couple of miles on this road. It was incredible. These are real people in real places. This isn't Narnia.

Journeying along the Via Sebaste, Paul and his friends cross the Taurus Mountains, a massive range that's a mile high, and head west, revisiting the churches they planted in Phrygia on their previous journey, in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and then Pisidian Antioch.

In the passage we are looking at today we find them in the vicinity of Pisidian Antioch, at the farthest point west that they had reached on any of their journeys, and having visited all of the new churches. Now before them is an open road, and they are asking themselves – now what? Where to now?

It's sort of like the moment when Samwise Gamgee comes to a dead stop as he and Frodo begin their journey. "If I take one more step, it'll be the farthest away from home I've ever been."

Then he says, "Gandalf used often to say there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. "It's a



dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,” he used to say. “You step into the Road, and . . . there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

Where was the Road taking them? The obvious direction was to carry on in the direction they were traveling, following the Via Sebaste toward Ephesus, the fifth largest city in the Roman Empire, straight down the road in the direction they were heading. 150 miles to Colosse, 150 more to Ephesus. Just stay on the Via Sebaste and keep going west.

But not far down the road they came to an intersection with a major north-south Roman trunk road that goes from the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea. And at that point, with an open road before them, they are prevented by God from going any further west, and are compelled to turn and go north.

### **Acts 16.6**

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

Just to clarify something that is kind of confusing. Two different regions are referred to as Asia in the Book of Acts, and neither one of them is the region we mean today when we talk about the continent of Asia much farther to the East.

What they called Asia *Minor* is the western and central portion of present day Turkey – pretty much everything you see on this map.

And the *Province* of Asia – sometimes just referred to as Asia – is the southwest corner of Asia Minor. It's the area in the lower lefthand corner where the seven churches named in Revelation are located: Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis, Smyrna, and so on.

If I were drawing this map, to make it a bit more accurate, I'd move the word Phrygia over to the right, just above the word Galatia, and then I'd scoot the word Asia down to where the word Phrygia is to show where the province actually is.

So Luke tells us that Paul and his companions were prevented from preaching the word in the province of Asia. Somehow, whether through some external circumstance or some internal prompting, their forward progress was impeded.

The word suggests that they had already made a decision about where they should go, and had set out in that direction, and then they were stopped and redirected by God to take a right and head north.

Now, as they are heading north, you can almost hear Paul and Silas thinking - hmm, north, well yes, that makes sense, head up through Mysia to Bithynia and then maybe west along the land bridge to Byzantium, present day Istanbul? Or maybe turn east instead, and follow the Via Egnatia, the other most important Roman road crossing Asia

Minor, head along the Black Sea and then back down through Cappadocia to Tarsus and then home to Antioch?

But as they get to what they think is their destination, again they are redirected.

### **Acts 16.7-8**

When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

This time a different word is used. It says when they tried to enter Bithynia they were not allowed. They were not given permission. That suggests that rather than making a decision about which direction they would go, and then being stopped, they asked first, perhaps proposing that maybe they should go this way? and they were not given permission.

So, the other options closed to them, they again turn left and head west, bypassing Mysia altogether, not stopping at the huge cities of Pergamum or Smyrna or Sardis, all of which were among the ten largest cities of the Roman empire, but skirting those and heading where? To the small seaside port city of Troas, just south of the ancient city of Troy

As far as I can tell, when the way north was closed to them, they weren't given a destination, just a direction. Troas seems not to be the place where they were told at the beginning that they were going, but the place where their directions led them in the end.

Picture them having crossed the entire country of Turkey, 785 miles on foot from Antioch, crossing towering mountain ridges and rushing river valleys and coming out of the mountains and woods at the shoreline, past fantastically large cities filled with kingdom opportunity, here, to a dead-end at the Aegean Sea.

Hmm. Now what? Why did God bring us *here*?

We don't have long to wonder. That night, God leads them for the third time, this time through a vision.

### **Acts 16.9-10**

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Why did God bring them to Troas? Two reasons come through in the text.

First, it turns out this small port city is the point of embarkation to Macedonia, which we know as northern Greece today. In other words, this is the gateway to Europe.

That doesn't mean Europe matters more to God than other parts of the world. Other disciples were called to go to other regions and tell people there about Jesus: Matthew to the Middle East and Ethiopia; Mark to Egypt, Thomas to Iran, Afghanistan, and India; and so on. God so loved *the world*, not just Europe.

But for Paul, his call, as God is showing him now, is to carry the good news to Europe.

That's one reason Paul and his friends were brought here. This is where they will hop the boat that takes them there.

The other reason they were brought to Troas is less obvious, but it's there in the text. Look again at verse 10.

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia.

This is where Paul and his companions first team up with a guy named Luke. The same Luke who becomes one of Paul's most important ministry companions for much of the rest of his ministry.

The same Luke who researches the life of Jesus and then writes the gospel of Luke.

One and the same with the Luke who does further research and then writes a second volume, in which he describes what Jesus continued to do and teach after he rose from the dead – a history of the early church called the Book of Acts – which includes this very passage, in which he appears on the scene for the first time.

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With that overview of the passage, let's step back and think about the implications that lie behind this passage and make a few observations about how God continues to speak and direct his followers today.

There are three important questions that come to my mind as I spend time with this passage. The first is, when it comes to God being involved in the life of his followers, and making his will known to them . . .

### **What is true about God?**

Here are two passages that capture the truth that lies behind the passage we just read.

**Psalms 32.8:** I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

**Isaiah 50.4:** Morning by morning he wakens me and opens my understanding to his will.

Clearly God has a will for us – he has intentions for us over the course of our day and the course of our lives – and he desires to make that will known.

He does so in two ways:

First, he makes his will known to us through his word

As **II Timothy 3.16-17** says

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

But God also makes his will known to us by his Spirit.

**John 14.16**

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete to help you and be with you forever.

In John 14 Jesus promises that each of his followers will receive the Spirit of God, whom he calls another Paraclete like himself. A paraclete is someone who comes alongside another to help, to guide, to direct, to encourage.

And that is just what we see as we look through the rest of the Book of Acts. In addition to the passage we just looked at, in which the Spirit prevents, allows, speaks, gives visions, and calls, listen to some other examples of the ways the Spirit speaks and leads in the Book of Acts.

Through his Spirit Jesus instructs in chapter 1, tells in chapter 11, speaks, directs, and calls in chapter 13, compels in chapter 20, and warns in chapter 22. Clearly God delights to make his purposes known to his people.

Three observations from our passage that I think are worth noticing about the way God makes his will, his intentions, known to us.

*Notice first*

God doesn't always show us the whole road. Sometimes, maybe more often than not, he just tells us the next step to take, or the next direction to go, or the next person to talk to, and he leaves us to trust him with where this is all leading, and to keep seeking his guidance at each step along the way. He unfolds his will for us in real time so that we can learn to trust him and not just a plan or a set of directions.

*Notice second*

Sometimes God leads us by directing us *not* to do something. My favorite poet, George Herbert, in a letter to a friend, described the leading of the Spirit as "motions.":

He said that in things that are not spelled out for us in Scripture, "there is room for motions, and [the] expecting of them." But he says those may come in the form of either *inviting motions*, when God directs us to do something, or *restraining motions*, when God calls us not to do something, and Herbert uses this passage from the Book of Acts as an example.

Then he writes

"I conceive that restraining motions are much more frequent to the godly than inviting motions because the Scriptures invite enough, for [they] invite[] us to do all good. But because [his followers] cannot do all, God often chooses which [they] shall do, and [he does so] by restraining [them] from what he would not have [them] do." (Valdesso)

We can't do it all. And God doesn't intend for us to do it all. The Spirit uses inviting motions and restraining motions to make it clear what is and is not ours to do.

*And notice third*

When it comes to discerning God's will or his direction, a lot of Christians speak in terms of God making his will known by opening or closing doors. The thought is that God will show us what he wants us to do by shaping the circumstances around us: I get a job offer, or I lose my grant money, or I have a falling out with a friend, or I hear the same word three times in one day, and through that the will of God is made known.

But as we saw from our survey of how the Spirit of Jesus led his followers all through the book of Acts, the primary way that God lead his people is not through circumstances, through open doors or closed doors, but by a much more personal internal conversation.

Certainly circumstances are one way that God accomplishes his purposes, but consider this. In Acts 4, the apostles are faced with a closed door and God asks them to walk through it.

The Sanhedrin commands John and Peter and the other disciples not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But when they are released they bring together the church and pray,

Acts 4.29

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.



And then they carried right on preaching and teaching and healing in the name of Jesus.

So in Acts 4 the followers face a closed door and God asks them to walk through it. And here in Acts 16, Paul and his friends stand in front of an open door, not once but twice, and God directs them not to walk through it.

Notice how in both situations, as far as we can tell, God speaks to his followers at a deeper and more intimate level than circumstances, speaking to their hearts rather than simply directing the current of events.

I love Dallas Willard's incredible book *Hearing God*, which is hands down the best book on learning to recognize God's voice and discern his will. It would be a great one for you to read, and if you're in a small group it would be great to read and discuss together.

In *Hearing God*, Willard talks about how God's desire as we mature as followers of Jesus is to move from his leading us through circumstances to his leading us through an internal conversation as he speaks to us and we learn to recognize God's "still small voice" (1 Kings 19.12). It's like how a mom leads a toddler by changing the environment, but leads a teenager by having a thoughtful conversation.

That requires that we grow in our ability to recognize God's voice when we hear it on the inside of us. And the only way that recognition can be cultivated is if we immerse ourselves in God's word every day, so that when that same voice speaks in our interior we recognize it.

I had a zoom reunion this week with the residence hall staff I was part of when I was a junior at Miami University a few years back. I was on the phone with Ben, Frank, Mark, Lee, JJ, Stan, Stu, Bryan, and others.

Part of the call, of course, was remembering how much time we spent together as a team. Among other things, we remembered how we would go on what we called Denny's runs, spontaneously piling most of us into my VW bus at midnight and driving down to Denny's on Colerain Avenue, where we would eat hot fudge sundaes and have saltine cracker whistling contests.

Toward the end of the call, one of the guys, a man named Ben, paused and got reflective. He said,

You know, it's funny, if you close your eyes and just listen, you all sound exactly the same as you did when we were all together back at Dennison Hall. I could recognize your voices anywhere.

Why? Because we spent so much time together. The best way for us to learn to recognize God's voice is to listen to it every day.

During my time with the Lord each morning I make a point to read every day from one of the gospels, so there is rarely a day that goes by when I don't hear the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. That way, when he speaks to me by his Spirit, I'm prepared to recognize his voice.

So God is a God who has specific intentions for us and he delights to make those known to us through his word and by his spirit.

What was the iconic symbol of God's engagement with his people as he led them out of Egypt, across the desert, and into the promised land?

Exodus 13.21-22

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

That leads us to the second question.

If God delights to walk with us, and to make his will known to us, to lead us as his people along the path he has for them – if that's what's true about God, then ...

### **What does God desire to be true about us?**

God desires us to be attentive and responsive and obedient to his will.

**Psalm 32.9:** Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.

Instead, let your posture be like Isaiah's who writes:

**Isaiah 50.5-7:** The Sovereign Lord has spoken to me, and I have listened. I have not rebelled or turned away. I have set my face like a stone, determined to do his will.

Incidentally, that's a phrase that was used to describe Jesus in Luke 9. Jesus delighted in doing the will of the father. In John 6:38, Jesus says, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me".

And Jesus urges the same sort of listening and responding life upon us.

### **Matthew 6.9-10**

This, then, is how you should pray:  
Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,  
 your kingdom come,  
 your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

You've heard me say before that I believe the Christian life can be summed up in four stages.

The place we all begin is with ourselves, and no point of reference outside of ourselves

1. I am in it for me

Then I become awake to the loving presence and involvement of God in my life and I realize

2. God is in it for me

Then, over time, the more I come to know him the more things begin to pivot around. I realize he is worthy of my service, and now

3. I am in it for God

Now I seek to live in a way that honors God and serves his purposes – but on my terms

But there's one more stage – the stage of relinquishment, of self-offering

4. Not my will but yours be done

I do the things God calls me to do, seeking not my own will but the will of him who sent me

Let me share a short example of how God leads when we open ourselves up to the leading of his Spirit. And as will become obvious, this is a story that brags about God, not about me.

Last week I attended General Assembly, our denomination's national meetings, up in the Detroit area.

To be honest, I'm enough of an introvert that as I arrived at the meetings I was dragging my feet, and not particularly looking forward to them. A room full of a thousand people, most of whom are strangers, doesn't show up on my top ten list.

So when I pulled into the parking lot, I felt like God was saying, "How about if you let this be about me?"

I admitted to God where I was, not really looking forward to being there. And then I offered the time back to God and asked him to take me by the hand and lead me,

showing me who he wanted me to connect with and how he wanted me to encourage them. Then I headed in, still with no great eagerness.

Partway into the first morning we took a break. Again I prayed that God would lead me and use me in my connections with others. Just then, God brought to mind a colleague in ministry who might be there. So I went out into the lobby to text him. I looked around and found a place to sit down, pulled out my phone, and began to text him.

Just as I started texting, I was interrupted by the man sitting next to me. "Hey, you're in our presbytery, aren't you?"

I looked up. "Yeah, I think you're right. You look familiar. I'm David."

He introduced himself, and we started chatting, my phone still in my hand. I was hoping to make some small talk and then get back to my text to a person I thought maybe I was supposed to connect with. But as we continued to talk it slowly dawned on me that this was the person God intended for me to connect with during that moment.

So I tucked my phone back in my pocket and he and I had a really significant conversation. He shared honestly about some of the joys and also some of the profound challenges and losses he experienced as a pastor. One of the first people he led to Christ had just committed suicide and it devastated him and his small church family. He said he was wondering about leaving where he was, and was kind of at a loss as to what to do. So we spent some time talking about it, with me asking him a bunch of questions and then interacting with what he shared.

A half hour later, I had my hand on his shoulder and we were praying together. When we finished, he said, "Wow. I can't tell you how important and meaningful this conversation was. I feel this is part of why I came to these meetings. What a gift!"

I said to him, "Well, I can tell you, this was a gift God wanted to give you today, because in answer to my prayer this morning, he brought me to you.."

And that was just the beginning of a couple of days of one rich, God-led interaction after another.

Then, just before the meetings ended, I ran into a pastor I know from our January gatherings. I said something that I felt God put on my heart to say to him. He thanked me and then he said, "You know, we were talking about you last night." I had no idea who "we" was. "Ran out of other things to talk about?" I asked.

"We were just talking about what a joyful presence you are when you come to these meetings, and how much you bring to the rest of us."

I laughed. And I said, "Wow. Thank you. That's humbling. And you know this, but that's not me. That's him in me."

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God delights to make his intentions known to us. He goes out of his way to communicate his loving purposes to his people, speaking to them by His Spirit all through each day.

And God delights when we are attentive to his voice and responsive to his will, so that his purposes are fulfilled in this world, in such a way that glory and honor returns to him.

That brings us to our third question. How will we respond?

### **What is our response to God's invitation?**

I want to invite us to respond now with a time of silence and by praying a prayer from Psalm 25. Would you pray this prayer now?

**Psalm 25.4-5:** Show me your ways, Lord,  
teach me your paths.  
Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.

Maybe you want to pray it related to a specific area in your life in which you are in need of God's specific guidance and direction.

Or maybe you just want to pray it as a more general prayer, as a way of expressing your openness and yieldedness and availability to God in all things, inviting him to take you by the hand and lead you through each day as you live your life for him.

Would you pray? As you do, the worship team will come up, and then after a few minutes they'll break in and lead us in our closing song as we offer our lives back to God and invite him to lead us into the lives of those he intends for us to love.